

Restarting Rhode Island

Rhode Island Department of State
2015 Transition Committee Report



Nellie M. Gorbea
Secretary of State



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Dear fellow Rhode Islander,

It is my belief that government can and must be effective, transparent and accountable to the people it serves in order to succeed. I also believe that Rhode Island has the potential necessary to achieve greatness and move forward. These principles guide my vision of a government that not only *works for* but also *involves everyone*. A government that creates opportunities, instills confidence and invites active participation.

Upon being elected Secretary of State, I assembled a diverse Transition Committee consisting of Rhode Islanders who are leaders in their fields and share my commitment and vision for our State. The Committee met on multiple occasions and developed a series of recommendations on how to re-ignite, re-think and re-energize the relationship between Rhode Islanders and their government.

The Department of State is the state's central hub that connects, informs and empowers Rhode Islanders in a variety of ways. Its primary asset is information. This asset must be deployed in an efficient, strategic and relevant manner in order to strengthen and empower our community. My goal is to make Rhode Islanders the best informed and engaged citizens in the country.

The Committee provided vital input on how the Department of State can help accomplish this goal by developing a stronger connection between Rhode Islanders and their government. With informed, engaged and voting citizens from all walks of life, Rhode Island will be poised to usher in a new era of civic participation, pride and opportunity.

This report is intended to serve as a blueprint and is built on the ideals of transparency, innovation, and collaboration. I greatly appreciate the thoughtfulness and commitment that my Transition Committee has dedicated to this project. I look forward to the work that lies ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nellie M. Gorbea".

Nellie M. Gorbea
Secretary of State



In the 2014 election, Rhode Islanders voiced their support for change. Yet often times the government's efforts to promote change go unnoticed or are easily dismissed by a weary public. The Committee sees this as both a major challenge and a major opportunity for Rhode Islanders and their government alike, an opportunity to effect change through transparency, innovation and collaboration.

This document provides recommendations from Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea's Transition Committee. The Committee met during the November and December 2014 transition period.

The Committee's recommendations seek to achieve meaningful results across the Department of State's broad platform, ranging from civic participation to open government to business services. We are confident that these recommendations can help spur a new era of civic engagement, increase trust and economic activity while boosting Rhode Islanders' sense of pride in our beautiful state.

Throughout this process, we have been impressed by Secretary Gorbea's vision, experience and values. Governor Raimondo and General Assembly leaders have a valuable and trusted partner in Secretary Gorbea. We encourage our leaders to partner with Secretary Gorbea to the fullest extent possible in their efforts to turn Rhode Island around.

We are grateful to Secretary Gorbea for the opportunity to be a part of this Transition Committee and to serve our state. We are hopeful for a future in which Rhode Island can realize its full potential and confident that the recommendations detailed within will contribute towards that goal in a meaningful way.

Sincerely,

Arianne Corrente, Transition Chair
John Bevilacqua
Bill Foulkes
Diane Lynch
Greg Mancini
John Marion
Patricia Martínez
Angela Romans
Pablo Rodríguez, MD
Jody Sullivan
Anne Szostak
Jim Vincent



Public Information Division

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Ensuring full transparency in government for all stakeholders and the general public is one of the Department of State's primary responsibilities. Secretary Gorbea made transparency a pillar of her campaign and is firmly committed to empowering a better-informed citizenry through easily-accessible and well-organized information. The recommendations listed below seek to improve the public's perception of their government. Our goal is to make it easy for Rhode Islanders to become more engaged in making the decisions that impact their lives.

1

Create a lobbying task force that will guide efforts to strengthen, simplify and clarify Rhode Island's lobbying laws and regulations, in turn making our state a national leader in good government

There's a concern that Rhode Island's lobbying laws are needlessly complicated for those who want to comply, and not stringent enough in their consequences for those evading responsibility to report lobbying activity. A thorough evaluation of current laws and regulations is required to identify vulnerabilities and opportunities for improvement and greater transparency. We recommend the formation of an independent and representative task force to oversee this review. The task force would be responsible for considering statutory, regulatory and administrative changes that increase Rhode Islanders' confidence and trust of government.

2

Increase the Department of State's oversight and enforcement authority as it relates to lobbying laws and regulations

The perception of undue influence reinforces the idea that government is compromised and not working for the people. Although the Department of State oversees lobbyists and lobbying activity, it lacks the ability to oversee and enforce the laws effectively, or to charge offenders independently. We recommend that Secretary Gorbea work closely with Governor Raimondo, Attorney General Kilmartin, and General Assembly leaders to provide the Department of State with the stronger authority to oversee and enforce lobbying laws.

3

Pass legislation to modernize the State's antiquated lobbying laws

Rhode Island's current lobbying laws lack the penalties that are needed to prevent and discourage abuse. We recommend that Secretary Gorbea examine the current maximum \$2,000 fine and the \$5 lobbyist registration fee. These amounts do little to encourage compliance with our laws or deter bad behavior, which is why we recommend a reasonable increase to these fines and fees. These changes will help incentivize lobbyists to be compliant with our laws and will help deter events like 38 Studios from happening in the future. We urge Secretary Gorbea, Governor Raimondo and the General Assembly to work together to deliver the safeguards that are necessary to protect Rhode Islanders.



4

Improve the reporting process for lobbyists

To better ensure that lobbyists are in full compliance with all applicable laws, the State needs a reporting system that is easy to use. The current Lobby Tracker system is unnecessarily complicated. We also recommend the consolidation of reporting requirements for General Assembly and Executive Branch lobbying into a single lobbying reporting requirement. We recommend that Secretary Gorgea listen and work with registered lobbyists and good government groups to develop a structure that best meets everyone's needs while preserving Rhode Islanders' ability to track all lobbying activity with ease.

5

Provide education on lobbying for all lobbyists, elected officials and government employees

Considering the changes we are advocating, we believe those who lobby as well as those being lobbied deserve a robust education. The Department of State's educational outreach should help those involved become better informed of the changes to the system and encourage compliance with the lobbying reporting system.

6

Improve Rhode Islanders' access to information through open source data and e-government innovation

The Department of State should be driving the democratization of information needed to engage and inform citizens. Easily understood and accessible information allows citizens, businesses and non-profits to make better-informed decisions and to contribute solutions to our State's biggest problems. Secretary Gorgea and the Public Information Division should provide readily accessible, open source data to keep citizens informed and engaged with their government.



Elections & Civics Division

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Our democratic process is fundamentally dependent on the integrity of our elections and protecting our constitutional right to vote. Secretary Gorbea's commitment as a candidate to make elections fair, fast and accurate supports this goal. The following recommendations uphold and expand on her commitment to meet our state's needs.

1

Clean up voter rolls

On October 4th, the Providence Journal¹ reported that there are approximately 180,000 more voters on our state's voter rolls than should be expected given U.S. Census Bureau data. We suspect that a considerable amount of this discrepancy can be attributed to voters having moved out of state or passed away over the years. Secretary Gorbea should seek out and administer operational updates to ensure that our state's voter rolls are clean and up to date - with a goal of ensuring that the actual number of registered voters matches the number of eligible voters. When completed, this will save Rhode Island tax dollars on the production of ballots, mailers for referendums, postage, personnel time and resources. Most importantly, it will improve the integrity of electoral process.

2

Modernize Rhode Island's election system

Providing fair, fast and accurate elections is one of the Secretary Gorbea's primary responsibilities as Rhode Island's Chief State Election Official. The integrity of our elections is made vulnerable by its nearly 20-year-old voting machines and a central voter registration system implemented almost a decade ago. To prevent a voting equipment breakdown that could compromise election results, our state needs to modernize its antiquated elections equipment. An updated voting system will help eliminate long lines and preserve the integrity of election results, while increasing accuracy and fairness. We recommend that an update in voting technology include electronic poll books to make it easier for poll workers to conduct elections. Secretary Gorbea should also implement online voter registration to make it easier for voters to register as well as to keep their voting record updated. There are 20 states that have online voter registration and four more states that have passed legislation to do so; it is time for Rhode Island to implement online voter registration. Regardless of technological advances, however, we must maintain a "paper trail" ballot to ensure fairness and accuracy.

3

Review the impact of photo ID requirements at polling places

Recognizing that there is a lack of data on the impact of the most recent changes to the photo ID requirement and the possibility that this new requirement is suppressing voter turnout, Secretary Gorbea should partner with social scientists and election system experts to review the impact of this law.

¹ See "Rhode Island's voting list doesn't add up" by Paul Edward Parker



4

Increase voter turnout

Democracy is at its best when all eligible voters go vote and are able to do so in a simple, convenient manner. We encourage Secretary GORBEA to provide Rhode Islanders with same-day voter registration and early voting opportunities. These changes will help to address some of the deterrents that potential voters face today.

5

Prevent mail ballot fraud

Rhode Island's voter ID law for in-person voting was recently reformed in an effort to curtail alleged or potential voter fraud, yet the process governing mail ballots – a greater vulnerability of our election system – was not. Secretary GORBEA should research and consider reasonable and responsible measures that will prevent the possibility of tampering with mail ballots.



Business Services Division

9

Small businesses and entrepreneurs are the backbone of Rhode Island's economy. Our government should be doing everything possible to make it easy for them to start and thrive. Opportunities to do so begin at the Business Services Division, where all Rhode Island businesses are registered. The following recommendations seek to help businesses grow and succeed.

1

Ensure full-implementation of the master application

Rhode Island-based businesses are required to fill out multiple forms at different state departments in order to register their business. The Department of State is often the first point-of-contact for businesses seeking to incorporate. We are heartened by the increased attention this problem is gaining from Governor Raimondo, House Speaker Mattiello and Senate President Paiva Weed. The Department of State's efforts to create a master application for business will succeed only with collaborations with the Governor's Office and General Assembly. We advocate that Secretary Gorbea take advantage of this focus on businesses and lead the streamlining of the registration process. This is a critical step toward creating a more business-friendly climate in Rhode Island.

2

Track and provide economic trend analysis

The Department of State is the state's information hub. However, the information must be more accessible so it can be harnessed and applied to assist the public and private sectors in making better-informed decisions aimed at improving our economy. We urge Secretary Gorbea to administer and promote open source data and e-government innovation across the department in order to better inform policy makers, business owners and Rhode Islanders.

3

Provide a better classification system for businesses, non-profits and social enterprises

As our economy grows and evolves, it is increasingly important to take business registration a step further by improving the classification of businesses registered in Rhode Island. A better classification system could begin, for example, with a simple modification to the registration form that would include designations for social enterprises, corporations formed but with no business activity or employees, and non-profits.

4

Increase consumer protection related to public notaries

While the vast majority of public notaries conduct themselves with integrity, loose standards regulate public notaries in Rhode Island, creating the potential for abuse, particularly in communities with a high concentration of immigrants. Increased disclosure and enforcement could help prevent miscommunication or misconduct to better protect consumers and public notaries. To improve these laws, we recommend a review of the statutes and, if warranted, an increase in consumer protections.



Rhode Island has made many important contributions to our nation's history. Our State's history, contained within the State Archives' remarkable collection of documents, images and publications, should be leveraged as a source of civic pride for newcomers and longtime Rhode Islanders alike. Secretary Gorbea recognizes the importance of our rich history and culture and aims to share it with the greatest possible audience. The following recommendations aim to help better preserve and share Rhode Island's legacy.

1

Preserve, secure and provide access to archives for the long-term

Rhode Island's small geographic footprint does not reflect its rich and lengthy history. While the State Archives contain much of our history, it is our understanding that Rhode Island is the only state in the country whose archives do not have a permanent home. Instead, the State Archives are housed in a leased office space that lies in a floodplain, potentially placing irreplaceable historical records at considerable risk of damage or permanent loss. We recommend that the Secretary of State work with the Governor and General Assembly leaders to find a permanent, safe and easily accessible home to protect and store our State's history.

2

Increase awareness of Rhode Island's history

Rhode Island's contribution to our nation's formation and American history is undeniably significant, yet it often goes unnoticed. Our state needs to build awareness around its history in order to capitalize on the benefits associated with education, tourism and civic pride. We support an increase in engagement that is based on a combination of outreach, education and improved accessibility to our State Archives. Secretary Gorbea has been a strong proponent of civic education in our schools. Ensuring greater access to our State Archives can help make civic education relevant, contribute to local tourism and bolster the public's pride in our state.

3

Prevent Rhode Island's history from getting lost in today's deluge of information and fast-paced technology

The process of organizing, archiving and accessing our archival collection entails a series of evolving challenges as documents continue to migrate from paper to digital without widely accepted standards for formatting and storage. This requires a system capable of capturing our history and, more importantly, storing and organizing it in a way that will provide for future use and portability. Without such an organizing system in place, we risk losing our history not to floods and time, but to an overwhelming volume of data and format obsolescence. Considering the timely manner of this project, we recommend that Secretary Gorbea review the retention of electronic data and documents, and consult outside experts if it seems necessary.



The Rhode Island State Library provides residents, government officials and staff with an excellent resource of information and research. The recommendations below offer an opportunity to expand and maximize this vital resource.

1

Creation of a comprehensive virtual library

The creation of a virtual online library would not only provide a much-needed resource for Rhode Islanders of all ages and backgrounds, but also engage adults and youth from across the state and globe. Virtual library exhibits that celebrate Rhode Island's rich past and prominent role in American history can also help boost Rhode Island civic pride and civic literacy.

2

Enhancements to website

The Rhode Island State Library website should be enhanced and regularly updated to provide accurate information that is timely and relevant to the end user, whether that is a state legislator or an elementary school student. We recommend an initial but immediate review of the website followed by periodic updates to ensure quality and accuracy.